

Remarks on Legislation Extending Unemployment Insurance Benefits
July 19, 2010

Good morning, everybody. Right now, across this country, many Americans are sitting at the kitchen table, they're scanning the classifieds, they're updating their resumes or sending out another job application, hoping that this time, they'll hear back from a potential employer. And they're filled with a sense of uncertainty about where their next paycheck will come from. And I know the only thing that will entirely free them of those worries, the only thing that will fully lift that sense of uncertainty is the security of a new job.

To that end, we all have to continue our efforts to do everything in our power to spur growth and hiring. And I hope the Senate acts this week on a package of tax cuts and expanded lending for small businesses, where most of America's jobs are created.

So we've got a lot of work to do to make sure that we are digging ourselves out of this tough economic hole that we've been in. But even as we work to jump-start job growth in the private sector, even as we work to get businesses hiring again, we also have another responsibility: to offer emergency assistance to people who desperately need it, to Americans who've been laid off in this recession. We've got a responsibility to help them make ends meet and support their families, even as they're looking for another job. And that's why it's so essential to pass the unemployment insurance extension that comes up for a vote tomorrow.

We need to pass it for men like Jim Chukalas, who's with me here today. Jim worked as a parts manager at a Honda dealership until about 2 years ago. He's posted resumes everywhere. He's gone door to door looking for jobs. But he hasn't gotten a single interview. Now, he's trying to be strong for his two young kids, but now that he's exhausted his unemployment benefits, that's getting harder to do.

We need to pass it for women like Leslie Macko, who lost her job at a fitness center last year and has been looking for work ever since. Because she's eligible for only a few more weeks of unemployment, she's doing what she never thought she'd have to do—not at this point, anyway: She's turning to her father for financial support.

And we need to pass it for Americans like Denise Gibson, who was laid off from a real estate agency earlier this year. Denise has been interviewing for jobs, but so far, nothing's turned up. Meanwhile, she's fallen further and further behind on her rent. And with her unemployment benefits set to expire, she's worried about what the future holds.

And we need to pass it for all the Americans who haven't been able to find work in an economy where there are five applicants for every opening, who need emergency relief to help them pay the rent and cover their utilities and put food on the table while they're looking for another job.

And for a long time, there's been a tradition—under both Democratic and Republican Presidents—to offer relief to the unemployed. That was certainly the case under my predecessor, when Republican Senators voted several times to extend emergency unemployment benefits. But right now these benefits, benefits that are often the person's sole source of income while they are looking for work, are in jeopardy.

And I have to say, after years of championing policies that turned a record surplus into a massive deficit, the same people who didn't have any problem spending hundreds of billions of dollars on tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans are now saying we shouldn't offer relief to middle class Americans like Jim or Leslie or Denise who really need help.

Over the past few weeks, a majority of Senators have tried—not once, not twice, but three times—to extend emergency relief on a temporary basis. Each time, a partisan minority in the Senate has used parliamentary maneuvers to block a vote, denying millions of people who are out of work much needed relief. These leaders in the Senate who are advancing a misguided notion that emergency relief somehow discourages people from looking for a job should talk to these folks.

That attitude, I think, reflects a lack of faith in the American people, because the Americans I hear from in letters and meet in town hall meetings—Americans like Leslie and Jim and Denise—they're not looking for a handout. They desperately want to work. It's just right now they can't find a job. These are honest, decent, hard-working folks who've fallen on hard times through no fault of their own and who have nowhere else to turn except unemployment benefits and who need emergency relief to help them weather this economic storm.

Now, tomorrow we will have another chance to offer them that relief, to do right by not just Jim and Leslie and Denise, but all the Americans who need a helping hand right now. And I hope we seize it. It's time to stop holding workers laid off in this recession hostage to Washington politics. It's time to do what's right, not for the next election, but for the middle class. We've got to stop blocking emergency relief for Americans who are out of work. We've got to extend unemployment insurance. We need to pass those tax cuts for small businesses and the lending for small businesses.

Times are hard right now. We are moving in the right direction. I know it's getting close to an election, but there are times where you put elections aside. This is one of those times. And that's what I hope Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle will do tomorrow.

Thanks very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:55 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House.

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